

"Maybe not," he admitted. "All the same, you'd give a good deal to get rid of me and not let your husband know it wasn't my body that was found. How much is it worth to you?"

"What do you mean?" cried the girl.

"I mean," said Rankin sullenly, "that I'm down and out. When I heard you thought me dead and had got hitched up, I meant to stay away. You weren't the only one that was sorry to have got married. Married life wasn't all beams and roses for me neither. Now, then, how much is it worth to you to set me on my feet, knowing I'll never come back? Make it \$500."

"You want me to deceive my husband?" cried the girl.

"I'm your husband," said Rankin, with another grin. "Come now, \$500 squares it. I know you can raise that. I didn't run through all your money. I wish I had, but now it seems just as well."

Dorothy rose and faced him scornfully. "You mean that if I give you \$500 you will never see me again?" she asked.

"That's about the size of it," he answered.

"I have \$500 left and you shall have it by the first post tomorrow," said the girl. "Give me your address."

"The Parker hotel," said Rankin.

That afternoon the girl drew all her money out of the bank and mailed it to him. No answer came, of which she was glad, but no Rankin returned. And Dorothy nerved herself to meet her husband on his return and keep the matter from him for his sake.

"Why, you look quite worn out, dearest," said Preston. "You'll have to run into the country for a few days' change."

She clung to him hysterically. "I don't want to leave you, Lawrence," she cried.

"What nonsense!" he answered, kissing her. "It will do you good,

dear. You are as white as a rag. Come, I want you to go off on a little trip and freshen up."

Dorothy consented, and Preston spent a week in town alone. It was on the third day that a tramp, shuffling along the road, looked up at the house, saw Preston and hesitated.

Then he went brakenly up the path and stood before him. Preston recognized the man and gasped.

"Rankin!" he cried.

"You've got me," answered Rankin.

"I thought you were dead."

"I guess you both did. Where is Dorothy?"

"Mrs. Preston is away," said Preston hotly.

Rankin grinned and seated himself upon the porch. "Let's talk like men," he said. "How much? How much for me to go away and never turn up again?"

"You blackmaller—"

"Oh, cut out the adjectives," said Rankin. "I guess it's worth \$500 to you not to let Do—I mean Mrs. Preston—know. Five hundred and you don't hear of me again."

Preston thought, his eyes fixed on Rankin's face. He was in a trap and for Dorothy's sake he must submit.

"I'll give you \$500," he said. "And listen, you hound! If ever I see you again I'll kill you. I'm a man of my word and I mean just that."

"That's all right," answered Rankin easily. "Five hundred goes."

"Be back in an hour," said Preston, "and you shall have it."

An hour later Preston handed Rankin his money and the man shuffled out of sight along the road. Preston watched him. He had meant what he said. For Dorothy's sake he was resolved to kill Rankin if he entered their lives again.

Rankin, who had lost the \$500 in a gambling hell, took the second sum to the place. He was sure he could easily get all he wanted out of Preston. He inquired and learned that Dorothy would not return for a day